

NEW JERSEY'S "MR. DEMOCRAT"

■ By George Amick

Richard J. Hughes was a liberal Democrat in the old tradition. He believed in the power of government to improve things, and he had a long list of things that needed improving.

"Activist" is an inadequate word to describe his approach as governor of New Jersey. He attacked problems, someone once said, as if he were afraid they would go away. Once, addressing a particular area of need, he invited the people to go with him "as far as logic can determine and as far as the human heart and the state's pocketbook can reasonably extend," and by his measure that was a considerable distance.

When Hughes left the governor's office, state government was playing a role it had never played before in education, urban affairs, environmental protection, regional planning, institutional care, law enforcement, civil rights and other areas. Many of his initiatives were novel not just for New Jersey but for other states, too. A fellow liberal, Terry Sanford, then governor of North Carolina and until January a U.S. senator, once enthused that "Dick Hughes is running the best state government in the country."

Later, as chief justice, Hughes presided over a number of noteworthy cases. One, on the state's responsibility for financing schools, put the finishing touches on work he had been unable to complete as governor. Others, like the Mount Laurel and the Karen Ann Quinlan "death with dignity" decisions, set national precedents.

He played a part in changing some political traditions as well. Before Hughes, New Jersey had never had a Catholic governor, but after him it had two more in succession. Like him, they were Irish. He naturally felt an affinity for John F. Kennedy, the first Catholic president, who



helped him win the governorship in 1961 with a personal appearance in Trenton late in the campaign. But he was much closer personally to Kennedy's successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, and because of this his interests and influence reached beyond the state lines in a way no other New Jersey governor's had ever done.

Hughes went "all the way with LBJ," even into the quagmire of Vietnam, and his loyal support of the U.S. effort there won him the description of "Lyndon Johnson's favorite governor." He was one of those chosen by Johnson to go to Vietnam to monitor—and so give credibility to—the local elections. Still, in the heat of his own reelection campaign in 1965, he vigorously defended the right of Eugene Genovese, a professor at Rutgers, to cheer publicly for the Viet Cong. To his party's relief, backing academic freedom turned out to be good politics.

When Johnson needed a place to meet with Soviet Premier Aleksei Kosygin, Hughes proposed the unlikely setting of Glassboro State College and thus became the "innkeeper" for this 1967 summit encounter. A party man to the core, he tackled the tough jobs along with the pleasant

ones. At the stormy 1968 Democratic National Convention he occupied the hottest seat, credentials committee chairman, refereeing the battles between white and black delegations from the South. The rulings he made in that no-win assignment offended many white Southerners and may well have cost him the vice-presidential nomination.

The bloody rioting in Newark and Plainfield was part of a national pattern, but Hughes, unlike other governors, took field command to contain it. It was probably a mistake; his tough words and actions in Newark brought him more criticism than anything else he ever did, but he would not have been Richard Hughes if he had stayed away, and he was confronting crises for which there were no precedents and no guidelines. Afterward, he demanded and got expanded programs to benefit the poor and minorities. He had enlisted early in LBJ's War on Poverty, and gave New Jersey the most comprehensive state-level anti-poverty program.

Hughes was thrust into the position to do all these things with little advance warning to the people of New Jersey, to his friends, or even to himself. In his formative years, no one saw the makings of a future state leader, with a part to play on the national world stages, in this bright, uncomplicated, easygoing young man. His record was unexceptional. As a student he was only average; he was expelled from a college where he had commenced an ill-advised study for the priesthood, and he failed his first bar examination.

Yet he had some strengths as well. He was capable of prodigious self-application when the occasion demanded, and this got him through his second bar exam, and later brought him success in the courtroom, as a private attorney and a judge, and as chairman of the Mercer County Democratic Party.

His gregariousness, his zest for politics and campaigning, were intense, and in them one could see a clear inheritance from his father, a longtime Democratic Party worker in Burlington County. And he had a talent for compromise, for sanding the rough edges off controversy, that earned him a lifetime nickname—bestowed by his close friend, the late Rep. Frank Thompson Jr.—of "two buckets."

But at age 51, Richard Hughes seemed to be well on his way to a prosperous but conventional career as a lawyer-lobbyist. Then, suddenly, he found himself running for governor of New Jersey. "Kismet"—fate—he called it, the same way he explained other turning points of his life.

Kismet, in this case, worked through the Democratic county chairmen—the "bosses." They had chosen him as their candidate in 1961 through a process of elimination, not really comprehending at the time what a political find they had serendipitously made. His opponent was the heavily favored James Mitchell, President Eisenhower's secretary of labor, well-known, enthusiastically backed by the *Newark News* and other leading newspapers, ready to sweep into office under the slogan "A Big Man for a Big Job."

Hughes cut the Big Man down to size. Not only did the Trenton lawyer prove to be a tireless campaigner; from years of legal and political work he knew New Jersey and New Jerseyans intimately. Mitchell, on the other hand, had no appetite nor aptitude for campaigning, and knew little about the state. A broken leg further slowed him down. On Election Day, Hughes had won by a paper-thin margin.

All previous Democratic governors of this century, including the revered Woodrow Wilson, had likewise made their initial run at the bidding, or at least with the approval, of the bosses. Hughes, once in office, behaved uniquely. He neither defied them, as Charles Edison and Robert Meyner had done, nor danced to their tune, in the manner of A. Harry Moore. He instead worked with them, usually but not always with success, to put through

the changes which he realized in time that he wanted.

It was in Hughes' attitude toward the bosses, and, by extension, toward the corrupt side of politics that his leadership was least satisfactory. Though he was more than willing to redefine the role of state government, he had no desire to change it structurally, nor to "reform" any of the other institutions that were dear to his heart—the Constitution, the Catholic Church, the family, the Democratic Party.

He made some brilliant appointments, such as Paul Ylvisaker as his first commissioner of community affairs, but he also placed some mediocrities in Cabinet posts as favors to Democratic county chairmen. He preferred not to know about the graft that went on in some of his state's city halls and courthouses; the crusade that finally put in jail Hudson County Chairman John Kenny, Jersey City Mayor Tom Whelan, Newark Mayor Hugh Addonizio and many of their lieutenants was led not by the state attorney general but by a succession of hot-eyed U.S. attorneys working for Richard Nixon's Justice Department.

The harshest blow was the discovery of corruption in Hughes' official family. The federals convicted his two closest aides and political advisers, Treasurer John Kervick and Secretary of State Bob Burkhardt. To the end of his life Hughes defended Kervick and Burkhardt as essentially good men whose trespasses, if any, were in the service of their party rather than of themselves.

Hughes himself was never touched by so much as a hint of scandal, but the federal prosecutions had smudged his administration's record, and a few dissenters pointed this out in the midst of the overwhelming approval that greeted his nomination as chief justice. On the other hand, the question was asked, by Hughes' admirers and by Hughes himself: How much could one person do? If he had had a compulsion to root out corruption, to go after John Kenny and perhaps others among the bosses who had put him in office, would he have accomplished any-

thing else? Where would he have found the critical Assembly and Senate votes that the big-county Democratic leaders delivered to him on many major issues?

It's an interesting question. Hughes never jailed a county political leader, but no other modern New Jersey governor did, either—and a dozen state administrations came and went while the late Boss Hague of Hudson County indulged in his remarkable manipulation of the police power, the judiciary, public spending and the electoral process. But no other governor received the acclaim bestowed on Richard Hughes, either, and if he was held to a higher standard, that may only have been fair.

When Hughes finally left government for good in 1979, at the mandatory judicial retirement age of 70, it was clear he had left an indelible mark. He was the only person ever to hold the two most powerful offices in New Jersey government, and in exercising their powers he had changed things that had seemed unchangeable, that had seemed almost a part of the character of the state and its people.

As remarkable as anything was that he left no scars. He could be rough, even reckless, in campaign rhetoric, but this to him was simply part of the game, and apparently his opponents felt that way, too. He had as little real malice in his makeup as any politician of his time. When Hughes retired, and, still later, when the state's justice complex was named for him, Democrats and Republicans alike tried to outdo each other in singing his praises.

He urged some journalist friends a few years ago to write with compassion about Sen. Wayne Dumont, his 1965 gubernatorial campaign opponent, who had just retired from the Legislature because of ill health. "He's a good man—a decent man," Hughes said repeatedly of the Republican whom he had verbally hammered from High Point to Cape May 25 years earlier.

Mr. Amick, editorial page editor for The Times of Trenton, is collaborating with John Kolesar on a biography of Richard J. Hughes. This piece was published in The Times shortly after Hughes' death last December.